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Canadian Institute for International Peace and Security

MARCH 1990

Factsheet 12

THE UNITED NATIONS AND INTERNATIONAL SECURITY

Introduction

The United Nations (UN) is an organization of almost all the countries in the world. It was formed in 1945, at the end of WWII, in the hope of laying the foundation for a lasting peace in the world. The purpose of the organization is summarized in the opening statement of its founding document, the Charter of the United Nations: to "save succeeding generations from the scourge of war [and] to unite our strength to maintain international peace and security. . ."

Historical Background

The first modern attempt to set up an international organization to guarantee world peace was the League of Nations. It was created in the early 1920s in reaction to the horror of World War I. In the mid-1930s, the League fell apart. This came about mainly because, in times of crisis, few member states were willing to put the *collective* interests of world peace, before the *individual* concerns of their own states.

During the Second World War, US President Franklin Roosevelt presented another plan for the collective maintenance of peace and security. He proposed an organization based on the League of Nations' experience, including the concept of collective security, but combining it with the right and responsibility of the most powerful states in the world to use their armed might to enforce order. This new formula, with elements of both idealism and realism, formed the basis of the United Nations.

The structure and function of the United Nations was worked out by experts in international law representing the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom and the United States. In addition, allies of these major powers, including Canada, put forward their own recommendations. The resulting document was a constitution called the UN Charter.

At the 1945 San Francisco Conference, forty-six states signed the UN Charter. In 1990, when the newly independent country of Namibia joins the UN, there will be a total of 160 members.

Structure

There are four major parts of the UN: the Security Council, the General Assembly, the Secretariat, and the International Court of Justice.

Security Council

The heart of the UN is the Security Council. This is the only UN body with the authority to intervene in international conflicts, using armed force if necessary. The main powers and responsibilities of the Security Council are:

- to maintain peace and security, given the authority and constraints defined by the UN Charter;
- to investigate threats to international peace or acts of aggression;
- to recommend methods for settling disputes;
- to call for non-military measures, such as sanctions, in an attempt to prevent breaches of the peace or to stop acts of aggression that are already underway;
- to take military actions against an aggressor, if all other measures fail.

The member states of the Security Council consider and vote on recommendations for action. These recommendations are called *resolutions*. Some resolutions have laid the foundation for the settlement of wars and other forms of armed conflict. For example, Security Council resolution 598 spelled out the conditions for the recent Iran/Iraq ceasefire. Based on other resolutions, the Security Council has authorized the use of peacekeeping troops in regions of conflict, such as the divided island of Cyprus, in order to maintain some degree of stability.

The Security Council has fifteen members. Five are *permanent* members — China, France, the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom and the United States. The permanent members were the five major powers at the end of World War II. Today they are the only declared nuclear weapon states in the world.

The ten *non-permanent* members each serve two-year terms. Any member of the UN is eligible for election as a non-permanent member of the Council. They are elected to these seats by a free vote of all the countries in the United Nations. Canada has served as a non-permanent member four times in the past, and in 1989 began another two-year term.

The five permanent members have the right to *veto*, or block, any Security Council resolution, simply by voting against it. Some view the veto power of the permanent members as a fundamental flaw in the UN. Others argue that the veto reflects the acceptance of a simple reality: the influence of the great powers on international affairs.

The General Assembly

The Security Council takes action; the General Assembly *deliberates*. Members can express their opinions, individually or collectively, on a particular conflict, but the General Assembly does not have the authority, under the UN Charter, to intervene in a dispute.

The major functions and duties of the General Assembly are:

- to consider and make recommendations on issues affecting international peace and security;*
- to discuss and make recommendations on the UN Charter;
- to receive and consider reports from the Security Council;
- to elect the non-permanent members of the Security Council;
- to consider and approve the UN budget.

Most of the UN's day-to-day work is done by committees formed by members states of the General Assembly. There are seven permanent committees, each concentrating on a specific area, such as disarmament or decolonization. There are, in addition, committees which are set up to discuss critical issues as they arise. These are referred to as *ad hoc* committees.

Both types of committee, permanent and *ad hoc*, debate the various viewpoints on the issue before them. At the end of the discussion, a document may be put forward with a suggestion for solving a dispute or avoiding a conflict. The suggestions are forwarded to the General Assembly where they may become *resolutions*. Successful resolutions are passed by a simple majority vote. In the General Assembly, each state gets a single vote, regardless of size, wealth or power.

Secretariat

The Secretariat is the civil service for the United Nations. It administers the programmes laid down by UN bodies. UN officials take an oath to forswear all national interests and to pledge their allegiance to the world organization.

The head of the Secretariat, the Secretary-General, is the highest UN official. As well as administrative functions, the Secretary-General has a political role as well. The Secretary-General can bring to the Security Council's attention any situation he deems a threat to world peace. The Secretary-General can use his position to mediate international disputes. For example, Secretary-General Javier Pérez de Cuéllar and his officials helped bring about the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan.

International Court of Justice (World Court)

The International Court of Justice was established by the Charter as the UN's principal judicial body. It provides a neutral forum where UN (or non-UN) states can submit their grievances. All submissions are voluntary, and the judgements of the World Court cannot be enforced. States do, however, sometimes take their disputes to the International Court of Justice, and abide by it decisions, despite this lack of power to enforce the decision. What they stand to gain by the exercise is the benefit of the moral and legal authority that the Court conveys.

The United Nations System

Besides the international problems described above, there are other threats to world security — injustice, poverty, illiteracy. The UN Charter established the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) to deal with these problems. It is within ECOSOC that many Third World countries have had their greatest impact on the role of the UN.

Today ECOSOC coordinates the economic and social work of the *UN system*. Examples of organizations within this system are the World Health Organization (WHO), the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF).

Conclusion

The formation of the United Nations was an attempt to avoid the devastation of war. Presently, there is no authority higher than the individual state to impose and enforce international law. Instead, the UN is based on *multilateralism* — the belief that the countries of the world can and should work together to solve their problems. For multilateralism to be successful, the UN requires the support of member states. Canada's foreign policy has long emphasized multilateral solutions to international problems. This policy is reflected in continuing, active support for the United Nations.

*The GA can consider any situation *except* an item under discussion by the Security Council.

FURTHER READING

"The United Nations," *Canada and the World*, vol. 54, no. 1, September 1988, pp. 14-29.

Javier Pérez de Cuéllar, *Report of the Secretary-General on the Work of the Organization*, United Nations, New York, 1988. (annual)

"Return to .ıe UN," *World Press Review*, vol. 35, no. 10, October 1988, pp. 13-24. (Items are excerpted from the world's media.)

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and Security
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Publié également en français
ISBN-0-662-17583-2